

Education and Special Education

Special Education Teachers

Special Education Teachers work with children and teenagers with a variety of cognitive, emotional, or physical disabilities that range from mild to severe, teaching them life skills and basic literacy. To help students learn special education teachers create an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which is a lesson plan modified to meet the student's individual education needs.

IEPs set student-specific goals for learning. Special education teachers will teach the individualized curriculum to the student, grade papers, and help the student develop academically and socially. They review the IEP with the student's parents, other teachers, and school administrators, provide updates on the student's progress, and make suggestions for learning outside the home. Other tasks that special education teachers are involved in include providing accommodations to students for learning the general curriculum by allowing for extra time on tests or reading the material out loud and preparing the student for transitioning between schools and into post-secondary life. In this instance the teacher will provide career advice and teach the student life skills (for example, learning how to balance a checkbook). Special education teachers spend a significant amount of time communicating with others involved in their students' well-being such as social workers, psychologists, and occupational and physical therapists.

Teachers often work with students from varied ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds. With growing minority populations in most parts of the country, it is important for teachers to work effectively with a diverse student population. Accordingly, some schools offer training to help teachers enhance their awareness and understanding of different cultures. Teachers may include multicultural programming in their lesson plans, to address the needs of all students, regardless of their cultural background.

Special education teachers typically work in school settings working with children in preschool through 12th grade. Special education teachers can either:

- have their own classroom and teach only special education students,
- work as resource teachers and provide individualized help to students in general education classrooms,
- work in classrooms that have both general and special education students, or
- work with a student for several hours a day in a room separate from the students' general education room.

Working with students who have special needs can be very rewarding, but at the same time it is emotionally and physically demanding. Special education teachers have heavy workloads, which include working with several students and completing paperwork documenting each student's progress. This documentation is necessary in case parents decide to take legal action against the teacher or school district if they feel their child is not receiving a proper education. Some schools have special education programs where teachers work year-round, but most teachers work the 10 month school year and receive summers and school holidays off.

Education/Training

How to Obtain:

Aspiring special education teachers must obtain a bachelor's degree, with a major in the field in which they wish to teach, including courses in special education. Undergraduate programs require teachers to work for a full year as a student-teaching intern.

A master's degree in education is required in some states.

Many states now offer professional development schools, which are partnerships between universities and elementary or secondary schools. Students enter these 1-year programs after the completion of their bachelor's degree.

All states and the District of Columbia require special education teachers to be licensed. The requirements for a state license usually include passing a test for competency in basic skills, such as reading, writing, and teaching. A teacher must complete a certain number of hours of continuing education to renew their license. Some states require special education teachers to receive a general education license, and then gain a specialization in special education. Many school systems are moving toward implementing performance-based systems for licensure.

New York State's Professional Standards & Practices Board for Teaching offers one level of certification for special education teachers:

The Approved Certificate is continuously valid, as long as the holder meets the minimum number of professional development hours. This certificate requires:

- Holding a provisional certificate
- Completion of a New York State Registered Program
- Passage of exams in liberal arts and education
- Permanent U.S. residence or citizenship
- 2 years of full-time teaching experience

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards offers a voluntary national certification. All States recognize national certification, and many States and school districts provide special benefits to teachers who earn certification.

The National Association of Special Education Teachers offers a voluntary certification for special education teachers. Teachers who obtain the certificate must re-certify each year. To be eligible, an applying teacher must:

- Obtain a master's degree in a field involving students with special needs
- Complete five certificate programs, as well as pass an examination on the material studied in those programs

More Information on Licensing and Certification:

- National Board for Professional Teaching Standards:
<http://www.nbpts.org/>.
- New York State Department of Education, Office of Teaching Initiatives:
<http://www.highered.nysed.gov/tcert/certificate/certprocess.html>.
- New York State Teacher Certification Examinations:
<http://www.nystce.nesinc.com/>.
- National Association of Special Education Teachers:
<http://www.naset.org/>.

Average Costs:

Tuition and fees for a master's degree in education costs an average of \$7,900* per year. Completion time is generally two years.

Licensure and certification occurs at the state level, so the cost varies. In New York State, an application for a teaching license costs \$50. Test registration fees total \$176, plus the cost of exam study aids.

Certification with the National Association of Special Education Teachers costs \$475 for organization members and \$625 for persons who are not members of the organization. Re-certification costs \$75.

National Board certification costs \$2,565, which includes the application processing charge, initial fee, and assessment fee.

Costs of professional development/continuing education vary.

* Note: This figure does not include federal, state, or university financial aid resources such as grants, fellowships, scholarships or work study. It also does not include vocational rehabilitation or other state resources available specifically to people with disabilities. Out-of-pocket expense may be significantly less.